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Monday, October 10, 2005

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Since You Asked

School Laptops: Save or delete?

By GISELLE GOODMAN, Staff Writer

Also on this page:

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The critics were right and just as predicted, seventh- and eighth-graders in Maine are using their state-issued laptops for games and for entertainment, not just tests and homework assignments.

Here is a sampling of how: During study hall, eighth-grader Sariah Abaroa, 13, of Arundel goes to www.coolmath.com, where she plays numbers games. Last year, Kayla Cogle, then a seventh-grader and first-time laptop carrier, joined a group that followed election results online during lunch. They would also download cartoons that made fun of President George W. Bush.

As for 12-year-old Ella Ross, a seventh-grader at the Middle School of the Kennebunks, she already has plans for her laptop when she has free time in school.

"I like to write stories," she said. "I like to write futuristic stories a lot and stories about different worlds and stuff. They usually involve a dog of some sort."

These tales of laptop use are something to consider as Maine's One-to-One Laptop Program draws to a close. The \$37.2 million program, which



Since You Asked

This week's story came to us via an e-mail that asked us to catch up on the Maine's One-to-One Laptop Program.

The program began in January of 2002 when Maine signed a four-year, \$37.2 million contract with Apple Computer, Inc., to provide iBook laptops to every seventh and eight grade student, and their teachers, in the state. In 2006, the contract is up and the state must decide whether to keep the program or not.

With 38,000 laptops in circulation at 243 schools, one reader asked this: "So. . . how are they doing nearly four years later? How many laptops have been lost? Stolen? Broken?"

We've tried to answer those questions in this report.

A critical tool

Giselle Goodman tells us about her experiences with the technological innovation of her middle-school days: scientific calculators for every student.

View from the front lines

Students rate laptops.

If you have a story you'd like written, contact us [via e-mail](#) or call Giselle Goodman at 791-6330 to leave a message. Please include your name and other contact information.

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By the Numbers

One of the many concerns over Maine's One-to-One Laptop Program is the cost of rough treatment. Many who opposed the idea said that 12- and 13- year olds



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Network Affiliate

started in January 2002 under the wing of then Gov. Angus King, ends in early 2006.

That means the 37,000 iBook laptops in the states' middle schools today (seventh- and eight-graders have 34,000 of them, their teachers have 3,000) are supposed to go back to Apple Computer Inc. at the end of the school year.

Some cheer the end of this era. Others – including some parents, kids, teachers and policymakers – aren't ready to see them go.

"It will be like being crippled," said Cogle, now 13, now laptop proficient.

Notes will have to be taken by hand again. Instant information will not longer be available to every student at the same time. For many assignments, it will be back to the computer lab, where there are way fewer machines than there are students.

It is hard to tell if this is such a tragedy. There has been no definitive answer to the burning question that haunts the program: Are laptops helping kids learn more? They certainly haven't helped with test performance. The latest round of the Maine Educational Assessment tests showed that middle-schoolers who used laptop computers for two years performed about the same on a standardized test as students before them who never had laptops.

David Silvernail of the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, which prepared a report on the first year of the program, says the test results don't speak to the program's success or failure. Stories from the classrooms are where to look, he said, and thanks to the laptops, kids have been more engaged in class, more attentive and more interested in the subjects they are learning.

"Are they learning differently? Are they learning more? We have evidence that that is the case," he said. "When you are in the classrooms, the schools, you can see it. But it is not the type of thing you can put down on paper with pencils to measure with a test every year. I think it is revolutionary but it's hard to capture what that is."

Kelly Fitz-Randolph, a seventh-grade science teacher at King Middle School in Portland, doesn't think it is hard to describe at all.

"They still need to know how to use a microscope, but (the laptop provides) instant learning," she said. "Things you would have had to wait for, things you couldn't get, you can better teach in better time – with hands on and eyes on – than you could without the tool."

would cause too much damage to the computers to make it worth the money spent. Have they?

Here are some numbers:

Computers lost and or stolen during since the project was implemented in 2002, statewide: 100

Number of computers lost and or stolen at King Middle School during the same time period: 2

Rate, across the state, of laptops that have been damaged since 2002: 3.3 percent.

Number of computers at King Middle School since 2002 that have been broken beyond repair and had to be replaced: 5

Information provided by the Maine State Department of Education and King Middle School

To read the evaluation report from the first year of the project log on to: www.usm.maine.edu/cepare, click on publications and then click on Maine Learning Technology Initiative. The report is titled: "The Impact of Maine's One-to-One Laptop Program on Middle School Teachers and Students" By David L. Silvernail and Dawn M.M. Lane; February, 2004

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Sisters of Charity Health System

Christina Gualin
Health Care Careers

ENTER CHAT



What she means, for example, is when she wants to show the students a paramecium, she just has them hop online to find a sample there. No more waiting for microscopes. No more preparing slides.

Fitz-Randolph said teaching the children of today without using computers is like expecting them to count on an abacus at school when they have been using calculators at home.

"They're digital natives. These kids were born with a computer in their hand," she said. "They communicate this way, they hang out with their friends this way. It is part of their lives."

Enough of a part to justify spending another \$37.2 million or more to keep the program going?

Dugan Slovenski, a mother of three boys from Brunswick isn't sure.

"For the amount of money (spent) there should be a definite measurable change," she said. "I'm still uncertain about the need for one-on-one laptop use. Are they there to learn the content or there to help the kids be comfortable with computers?"

Her concern is that the computers only afford kids the opportunity to add more bells and whistles to their projects, and not more content. She is also concerned that students are using the computers inappropriately.

"It's just a high-tech version of passing notes to each other or doing crosswords under the desk or whatever," she said.

The kids who have them say, yes, the laptops are being used for things other than school work.

"Some kids do abuse them," said 13-year-old Donald Bennett, an eighth-grader at King Middle School. "It's just the truth. Some kids just aren't ready. Most kids, though, are ready. It helps more kids than it hurts them."

It certainly helps Abaroa play math games. It has helped Cogle decide who she favors politically. It is also helping Ross write the next great fiction novel about a dog named Ollie, or Jazz, or whatever.

That said, Cogle challenges any critic to give her a good reason why the laptop program should not continue.

"If you had a chance to learn with this (laptop)," she said, "you would change your mind."

Staff Writer Giselle Goodman can be contacted at 791-6330 or at: ggoodman@pressherald.com

Reader Comments

How do the laptops work for you?

Bob Hotton of Willowbrook, IL
Oct 13, 2005 10:45 AM

Wow, how does Mr. Monke allow his work to appear in an online publication which will give him a chance to do more harm than good and cause me to become socially detached by reading his article. In this digital age, I hope my own children never encounter such a closed-minded instructor as Mr. Monke.

As for kids and their video screen addictions, this is a product of parenting choices - don't blame the TV or the Nintendo or the laptop for parents neglecting their

children and allowing them to use video entertainment without some limit. I need to supervise my young son's video use just as I have to keep him from eating an entire box of Twinkies before dinner.

The laptop article uses a select small body of research to draw conclusions. There is research which shows that students are more engaged and motivated by how they learn, that laptops improve student attendance rates (you can't teach them anything when they don't show up), and that the concept of the digital divide has implications for young people who will enter a workplace where everyone from doctors, lawyers, bankers, auto mechanics, and food servers in restaurants all use computers to assist them with their jobs.

Margaret of New Gloucester, ME

Oct 13, 2005 9:58 AM

One of the first negative effects of the laptops was the comment from a teacher, "what do we need a library for when we have classroom collections (of fiction) and the laptops?" Countering the ignorance of that statement, and others like it, calls for understanding of just what the purpose of a computer is.

For some the purpose is to play, to email (communicate with friends), and to find quick answers. For others it becomes a tool, one of many in a toolkit which may include:

experts, found both in person and online,
books written by experts in a field,
encyclopedia articles, written by experts in a field, magazine articles found on
statewide databases, written by experts in a field, and
books from other libraries borrowed via Inter Library Loan, and the librarian.

For the experienced information searcher, and here we must not assume that because a person has been Googling since they were five they are experienced, the toolkit is used effectively by choosing the best resource to answer the question asked. The experienced searcher knows the best way to locate information by using good search terms and effectively limiting the search to only that area which is of interest. The key is to know which resource is the best one for answering the question.

Do you recall the days of old when research involved buzzing down to the library and blundering about in the shelves, maybe asking the librarian for a few helpful hints? The reason the librarian was helpful was because she/he was trained to know which resource would be most effective in answering different types of questions. The good news is that the librarian is still trained to know these same things and the best part is that they know online resources and print resources and are fluent Information Communication Technology searchers.

The purpose of the laptops is to enhance the educational experience, to use the laptop as the tool that it is, to teach the use of technology so that our students can become Information Fluent and ready to take their place in the 21st century world which is digitally alive with possibilities. For the student to benefit it requires a collaboration between classroom teacher, teacher-librarian, technology teacher, and student. Just for the record though, a student (and that includes any learner no matter the age) will learn when ready to learn. Some are ready sooner than others and all the toys in the world won't make them learn without incentive and a desire to explore.

So, should we keep the laptops? Yes, unequivocally. But please remember that the learning is enhanced by collaboration and a desire to learn. The desire to learn can be enhanced by reading aloud to a child from infancy which makes them ready to learn when they enter school. Thus, learning is a cooperative/collaborative effort with the laptops being but one tool towards a competent intellectually alive individual who is ready to take a productive place in a society of the future.

Justin Cole of Saco, ME

Oct 13, 2005 9:27 AM

I find it interesting that these laptop-related actions were spun into a negative light by the author.

It certainly helps Abaroa play math games.

It has helped Cogle decide who she favors politically.

It is also helping Ross write the next great fiction novel about a dog named Ollie, or Jazz, or whatever.

Math games serve a valid educational function as they reinforce math skills.

Having students who are politically aware means we will have adult citizens who are politically aware in the future, which is a good thing in a country where many people have no real idea what is going on in their country. And, lastly, having a student who writes in their spare time is something that should be applauded, not

criticized (especially from a professional writer!) because practice makes perfect, especially with complicated tasks. And writing a solid story in a read-able manner is a complex task.

Furthermore, in response to the commentary by Dugan Slovenski ("Are they there to learn the content or there to help the kids be comfortable with computers?") I will say that being comfortable with computers should be one of the cornerstones of the educational process. There is not a single employment opportunity that I can think of in which technology is not used to make the job easier, therefore computer proficiency should be one of the fundamental aspects of education today, not a peripheral concern.

The children today are immersed in technology, a concept that many adults have trouble with. Technology is everywhere, all the time for these children and it will only become more so. For example, some grocery stores are piloting computerized shopping carts to assist shoppers with making sure they have all the items they need while keeping a running tally of cost and, eventually, so they can tally the nutritional content of their shopping cart. With something as simple as grocery shopping becoming computerized, can anyone really contest that computer skills are important to the students currently in school?

Carol Saulnier of Canaan, NH

Oct 12, 2005 12:58 PM

At Indian River School in Canaan, NH where I teach 7th grade science, we were fortunate to receive a grant to pilot a program similar to Maine's MLTI program. In the 2 years we have been using 1:1 laptops, I have been amazed at the positive change in students' attitudes about learning. The "bells and whistles" can be motivators for students to study topics for which they may not have a previous interest. Students are willing to put in countless hours in preparing a power point on a grammar lesson or making a movie about the movement of chromosomes in mitosis. I have not witnessed a similar amount of time put into studying lessons out of a textbook.

The fact that often students are more proficient with technology than their teachers has had another surprising benefit. It gives the students the opportunity to teach the teachers, and fosters an attitude of collaboration and sharing of learning, which, in turn, carries over to a more positive school climate. These are not changes that are measured in tests.

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